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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to investigate the role perceptions of the state directors of community college education in 11 states. The directors were asked to rate 67 managerial activities in terms the importance of the activity and the amount of time they spent on it. They were also asked to identify the activities needing more of their time and those they found most enjoyable. Study findings, based on responses from all 11 directors invited to participate, included the following: (1) respondents consistently gave the highest ratings, both in terms of importance and time alloted, to the activities associated with resource allocation; (2) the lowest ratings were given to activities involved in contract negotiation and grievance handling; (3) for five items, there was a discrepancy between the amount of time spent and the importance of the item, indicating that the directors spent more time than necessary "staying tuned to what is going on in competing educational organizations," "talking to different people to find out unofficially about the organization's plans or management decisions," "keeping professional colleagues informed about the organization," and "maintaining a personal network of in-house contacts through visits and phone calls"; and (4) the directors indicated a desire to spend more time than their present schedules allowed in activities associated with leadership and resource allocation. A 13-item bibliography and information on Mintzberg's model of managerial roles are included. (EJV)

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Views From the Top:

How Community College CEOs See Their Occupational Roles

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Abstract

This research was designed to investigate the role perception of the chief executive officers of selected state community college systems. Research questions focused on CEO perception of role behavior in connection with perceived importance and time devoted to various managerial roles, with attention paid to significant differences related to factors of system size and incumbency. There was a 100% response rate for the study. Participants rated role activity items for time and importance, and the results were ranked for comparison on both roles and role activities. There was general agreement on the rankings, with the role of Resource Allocator receiving the highest score and that of Negotiator the lowest. There were no significant differences by size or incumbency. Disparities in some of the rankings suggested a possible need for further attention to patterns of time/task allotment in scheduling.

The study of human behavior in organizations has produced an extensive body of literature in management science. When attention is turned to the individuals at the top of these organizations -- the chief executive officers -- the inquiry often takes on an aspect of interest to a wider public. We are curious about the people who run things in our lives. One of the more pragmatic approaches to the study of executive behavior comes from the work of Henry Mintzberg, whose observations of working CEOs led to his delineation of a set of managerial role categories organizing the executive's day into identifiable behavioral domains.

This research was based on Mintzberg's managerial roles, and was designed to provide working profiles of chief executive officers as they perceive their jobs -- their views from the top. Its purpose was to investigate the role perceptions of a group of selected state community college system directors in terms of how they believed they were fulfilling their current role requirements, how they would like to improve their present performance, and how they might suggest that future administrators prepare for the position in light of present and future role expectations. Research questions focused on executive perception of role behavior in connection with the ranked importance of various managerial roles and role activities and the relative amount of time spent on them. Resulting data were examined for patterns of agreement and variation to produce the clearest picture of these incumbent CEOs. Factors of system size and length of incumbency were also included for consideration in the analysis.

Background

Conceptual framework for the inquiry came from Mintzberg's set of ten managerial roles (1973). These categories provide a useful taxonomy for researcher and practitioner alike in their descriptions of administrative duties as being interpersonal (Figurehead, Leader, Liaison); informational (Monitor, Disseminator, Spokesman); or decisional (Entrepreneur, Disturbance Handler, Resource Allocator, Negotiator) in nature. Table 1 presents a brief summary of the managerial roles and activities; the role of Technical Expert was added by Lau, Broedling, Walters, Newman, and Harvey in 1979.

Mintzberg contended that administrators influence their organizations by means of the relative importance they place on each of their roles, and that CEO preferences for particular roles determine choices of management strategies and the approaches taken to implement these strategies (Richardson, cited in Campbell, 1984). Research validating his findings has concerned itself largely with executives in industry (e.g., McCall & Segrist, 1980; Paolillo, 1981; Kotter, 1982; Pavett & Lau, 1982; Tsui, 1984). Relatively little attention has been paid to managerial role behavior in educational chief executives. While Mintzberg (1973) did include a school superintendent among his participants, as have Kurke & Aldrich (1983) and Sproull (1981), there has been little substantive inquiry into the perceptions of individuals in postsecondary education, and none into the roles of community college state chief executive officers.

Method

Procedure

A questionnaire based on the instrument developed by Lau (Lau et al., 1979) was field tested, and the 11 state directors selected were contacted by

telephone. Upon their agreeing to participate, they were sent letters of confirmation, followed by packets containing cover letters, copies of the instrument with return envelopes and postcards indicating receipt of the packet. Late respondents were sent reminders, and brief structured telephone interviews were conducted for clarification on major points. All of the individuals invited to participate in the study responded, giving a 100% return rate. A precis of the results was sent to each of the participants.

Instrument

The instrument was constructed on a model developed by Lau (Lau et al., 1979); Pavett & Lau, 1982), which had been researched with stringent controls for validity and reliability (Pavett & Lau, 1984). It consisted of 67 items describing specific managerial activities, and was typeset for clarity and designed in book format for user access. Respondents were asked to check boxes rating each item on a seven-point scale for both importance and time spent on the activity. Two open-ended questions were included, asking which activities the respondents thought needed more of their time and which they found most enjoyable. Forms were coded for system size and incumbency.

Data Analysis

Raw data were summed and averaged to give mean scores on individual items for both time and importance; these items were then ranked by time and importance. Items were organized into role clusters following Lau's procedures (Pavett & Lau, 1982), and the collapsed roles were ranked by mean ratings on time and importance. It should be noted that, while the methodology used to rank items for comparison comes from earlier research (Lau et al., 1979; Pavett & Lau, 1982), the practice of ranking roles is original with this research. As the study had sought to determine possible effects of

system size and length of incumbency on role perception, individual responses were examined and the roles ranked for comparison on these factors. Table 2 gives a comparison of role rankings by perceived importance and time spent.

Data Source

Since Mintzberg's research provided the theoretical base for the study, the clearest case for comparison could be made with individuals whose organizational profiles matched those of the CEOs in the original work. These directors occupied positions heading their statewide college systems, with coordinating or controlling authority over individual institutions but responsibility for reporting to a board of directors. The basis for selection came from state system organizational profiles found in the State Postsecondary Profiles Handbook (Education Commission of the States, 1982). As there exists a considerable variety of organizational structures among the state community college systems, only 11 chief executives were found who met the criteria for selection. All of the nominees participated in the study. They headed systems ranging in size from 115 institutions and over one million students to 2 campuses enrolling slightly over 4,000 people. They had been in their present positions for periods of 10 years to just over 3 months.

Results and Conclusions

There was considerable agreement among the participants on perceived role behavior for both individual activities and roles. Resource Allocator items were consistently given the highest rankings for both time and importance, and Negotiator items received the lowest rankings. Of the six activities ranked as most important, four ("Participating in defining organizational strategies and policies", "Determining long-range plans and priorities of your organization", "Allocating your own time", and "Formulating budgets") belong

to the role of Resource Allocator. The lowest rankings fall to activities involved in negotiation and grievance handling ("Negotiating with groups internal to your organization for necessary materials, support, commitments, etc.", "Negotiating labor-management agreements or dealing with union representatives", and "Handling formal grievances").

While rankings were generally congruent for activities and roles, with the most important activities being given the most time, there were some notable discrepancies. Five items in the informational sphere had much higher time rankings, suggesting that the CEOs involved believed that they were spending more of their time here than the activities warranted. These items described activities in the Monitor ("Staying tuned to what is going on in competing educational organizations" and "Talking to different people to find out unofficially about the organization's plans or management decisions"), Spokesman ("Keeping professional colleagues informed about your organization" and "Answering letters or inquiries about your organization"), and Disseminator ("Maintaining your personal network of in-house contacts through visits and phone calls") roles.

Discrepancies in the Leader ("Evaluating, both formally and informally, your subordinates' job performances", "Attending to the training and development needs of employees", "Attending to staffing requirements in your organization, such as hiring, firing, promoting, and recruiting", and "Providing new employees with adequate training and introduction to the job") and Resource Allocator ("Allocating your own time" and "Allocating funds within your organization") roles give considerably higher rankings to importance than time, indicating that these were areas where the executives wanted to spend more time than their present schedules allowed.

Responses to the open-ended questions on time allocation preferences gave the highest priorities to long-range planning, followed by staff development activities. Follow-up telephone interviews focused on the issues of long-range planning (perceptions were about equally divided between seeing planning as process and product), staff development (the respondents agreed that this term applied primarily to their own immediate staff, although they also noted a desire to establish more rapport with their institutional presidents and local board members), negotiation (the low ranking given to the Negotiator role appears to stem from the wholly political - and largely adversarial - cast given to role activities by the existence of faculty senates and teachers' unions; these CEOs experienced great difficulty in viewing negotiation in any other context).

Discussion

The CEOs in this study agreed to a remarkable extent in their role perceptions. There were no significant differences which could be attributed either to system size or to length of incumbency. Regardless of how large their organization was or how long they had been its head, they saw themselves first and foremost as resource allocators, interested in strategic planning and institutional development. Their profiles were in fact very similar to those of their colleagues in business and industry (cf. Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1982), government (Lau et al., 1979) and higher education (Cohen & March, 1974). Like CEOs everywhere, they chafed at the increasing - and conflicting - demands made on them by growing numbers of constituents. Like CEOs everywhere, they wanted to spend more time 'out in the trenches' getting the feel of the organization. And, like CEOs everywhere, they are unlikely to get very far in their attempts to change this situation. Some activities

might allow for a more desirable use of time -- perhaps their most precious resource -- by adopting more deliberately planned opportunities for interaction with their peers and higher level subordinates, by organizing staff development activities to utilize the director's own role strengths to best advantage, and by considering the use of a more structured system of time/task allotment based on a review of these study results.

This is the first study of managerial behavior conducted at the level of state community college director. The extent of participant response reflects a level of interest in this area of administration which indicates a serious need for further exploration and a sizeable opportunity for research. While it is understood that this research involved a small number of participants and that caution is recommended in any attempt to generalize conclusions, it should be noted that a whole population is represented in the results. Observations and conclusions emerging from the findings are to be understood as having direct reference only to the participants and the system involved.

However, insights into the behavior of any group of executives should prove useful in designing and conducting further research into organizational management. Leadership behavior at the top level of educational administration is all too frequently a matter of on-the-job training, with the chief executives finding themselves unable to locate either the information about desirable management procedures or the time to put them into practice. Developing and promoting the use of concrete descriptive techniques such as the managerial roles can provide practitioners with useful bases for current performance appraisal and guidelines for future professional development. Prospective administrators and search committees may wish to consider these findings in structuring their pursuit of matching individual goals with system needs.

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TABLE 1

MINTZBERG'S MANAGERIAL ROLES

Summary of Executive Roles

Role	Definition[a]	Identifiable Activities from Study of Chief Executives
	Interpersonal	
Figurehead	Symbolic head; obligated to perform a number of routine duties of a legal or social nature.	Ceremony, status requests, solicitations.
Leader	Responsible for the motivation and activation of subordinates; responsible for staffing, training, and associated duties.	Virtually all managerial activities involving subordinates.
Liaison	Maintains self-developed network of outside contracts and informers who provide favors and information.	Acknowledgment of mail; external board work; other activities involving outsiders.
	Informational	
Monitor	Seeks and receives wide variety of special information (much of it current) to develop thorough understanding of organization and environment; emerges as nerve center of internal and external information of the organization.	Handling all mail and contacts categorized as concerned primarily with receiving information (e.g., periodical news, observational tours).
Disseminator	Transmits information received from outsiders or from other subordinates to members of the organization; some information factual; some involving interpretation and integration of diverse value positions of organizational influencers.	Forwarding mail into organization for informational purposes, verbal contact involving information flow to subordinates (e.g., review sessions, instant communication flows).
Spokesman	Transmits information to outsiders on organization's plans, policies, actions, results, etc.; serves as expert on organization's industry.	Board meetings, handling mail, and contacts involving transmission of information to outsiders.
	Decisional	
Entrepreneur	Searches organization and its environment for opportunities and initiates "improvement projects" to bring about change; supervises design of certain projects as well.	Strategy and review sessions involving initiation or design of improvement projects.

Disturbance Handler	Responsible for corrective action when organization faces important, unexpected disturbances.	Strategy and review sessions involving disturbances and crises.
Resource Allocator	Responsible for the allocation of organizational resources of all kinds-in effect, the making or approval of all significant organizational decisions.	Scheduling; requests for authorization; any activity involving budgeting and the programming of subordinates' work.
Negotiator	Responsible for representing the organization at major negotiations.	Negotiation.
Technical Expert	Providing expertise to projects. Serving as a consultant to internal or external projects.	Directing a project or subproject; solving project-centered problems.

[a]Definitions for all roles but "Technical Expert" based on The Nature of Managerial Work by Henry Mintzberg (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

Table 2

Role Perceptions Ranked by Importance and Time

Role	Importance		Time	
	Rank	Mean[a]	Rank	Mean[a]
Resource Allocator	1	5.859	1	4.394
Leader	2	5.434	8	3.586
Spokesman	3	5.409	2	4.386
Entrepreneur	4	5.146	4	3.855
Disseminator	5	5.000	3	4.106
Monitor	6/7	4.955	6	3.807
Figurehead	6/7	4.955	7	3.591
Technical Expert	8	4.849	5	3.849
Disturbance Handler	9	4.379	10	3.227
Liaison	10	4.164	9	3.455
Negotiator	11	4.109	11	3.055

[a]Based on a 7-point scale, where 1 = None and 7 = Great Deal

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